

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

Vol. 22 No. 2

February 1954

Whole No. 257

OLD MELODRAMAS

By J. Edward Leithead



From the J. Edward Leithead collection

OLD MELODRAMAS

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A brightly colored lithograph, like a circus poster, displayed in a barber-shop window catches my eye. It's a poster announcing that "The Gambler of the West," A. H. Woods' famous melodrama, will play a week's engagement at Blaney's Theatre or the National Theatre. This is Philadelphia sometime after the turn of the century, and these two houses specialized in the good oldtime lurid melodramas which other oldtimers like myself will probably recall with the feeling that "them was the days". We had these sure-fire melodramas to entertain us, colored cover weeklies were being issued every day but Sunday from the Street & Smith and Frank Tousey presses, in spring and summer the circuses followed one another for two-week stands (not one, as nowadays), including Wild West shows, Buffalo Bill's or Pawnee Bill's or Miller Bros. 101 Ranch.

This poster of "The Gambler of the West" was but one of many that I watched for, chiefly in the windows of barber-shops in my neighborhood. Possibly this was as good a place to display them as any, since most of the dramas had a strong masculine appeal. Lucky Jack Gordon, the gambler in the poster, is attired in black frock coat and boots, stiff-rimmed cowboy hat, a handsome young fellow, and the lady grasping his hand is a beautiful blonde in Eastern attire. Surrounding them are cowboys and a cowgirl, with drawn six-shooters. The caption says, "Caught in a Trap", yet the Eastern girl's words indicate romance budding in the bright face of danger: "You're a gambler, but my heart tells me that I am safe in trusting you!"

Didn't we go for it, boys? We waited tensely in our seats for the moment when the guns ripped out of holsters and the bad hombres got their come-uppance, and the hero and heroine went into a clinch, while the smell of gunpowder drifted back from the stage.

How many of these melodramas entranced American audiences until the movies took over, it would be next to impossible to estimate. Some were played by stock companies, that remained in one place a whole season or longer, others by road shows constantly on the move. It seems that the Western and detective "mellers" outnumbered those of a less lurid type, yet there were plenty designed to please the ladies, give them a romantic thrill or cause them, misty-eyed, to grope hurriedly for the pocket hanky, such plays as "Driven from Home", "Wedded and Parted", "How Hearts are Broken", "A Little Girl in a Big City", "Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model", "Ber-

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tha, the Sewing Machine Girl" and "The Dancer and the King." Plays like "East Lynne", "The Two Orphans", "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Way Down East" had a universal appeal.

The National Theatre was at 10th and Callowhill, Philadelphia, Blaney's Theatre at 6th and Arch. There was also the Casino, at 8th and Walnut. Blaney's was earlier called the Arch Street Theatre, and here, sometime in the 1870's, Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack appeared in Buntline's "Scouts of the Plains". Later, Cody appeared in a play by Major A. S. Burt, "May Cody, or, Lost and Won", at the old Bowery Theatre in New York.

I suppose that few, if any, of these melodramas featured genuine frontiersmen in leading roles except those starring Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack and Wild Bill (the latter for a short time only, as Hickok seemed not to take to a life behind the footlights), but certainly there were many actors who could play Western parts convincingly. I have in mind a young actor whose name, unfortunately, I do not remember, but who made memorable the role of "Young Buffalo", hero of a trilogy of melodramas by that prolific playwright, Charles E. Blaney. They were, in this order, I think, "Young Buffalo, King of the Wild West", "The Sheriff of Angel Gulch" and "Young Buffalo in New York".

I am indebted to the J. S. Ogilvie Publishing Company, which, long ago, was located at 57 Rose Street, New York, for much of the information in this article. This firm published, among other paper-covered books, an excellent Play Book Series, many of the covers being colored reproductions of posters used to advertise these melodramas in bygone days. Some of these little volumes also contain photos of actors and scenes from plays, and one, at least, of a playwright famous at that time, Charles E. Blaney. The books were novelized from the plays by various authors, Grace Miller White, Olive Harper, Charles E. Blaney, Arda La Croix and others. They form an invaluable record of plays that once thrilled and now are all but forgotten.

Western dramas were always big favorites; besides the ones I've already mentioned were "The Cowboy and the Squaw", "Bunco in Arizona", "The Angel and the Ox", "The James Boys of Missouri"—these four were not novelized in the Play Book Series, so far as I know, but the following were: "Montana", "Through Death Valley", "The Queen of the Cowboys", "Fighting Bill, Sheriff of Silver Creek", "The Queen of the Outlaw's Camp", "The Great Express Robbery", "Jack Sheppard, the Bandit King". Let me pause here to mention a scene in the latter drama—the poster, also used as the book cover in the Play Book Series, is reproduced on the cover of this issue of ROUNDUP. I never saw the play myself and wonder what sort of stagecraft was employed to reproduce the explosion wrecking the bridge as Jack Sheppard gallops off with his girl, shooting back at his enemies. They did some marvelous things to get realistic and exciting effects. One method of presenting racing horses on the stage was to set them going on a huge treadmill.

Mr. Blaney, as well as being a famous playwright, evidently owned a chain of theatres, as the Charles E. Blaney Amusement Company, Inc. is advertised in a copy of "The Sheriff of Angel Gulch", listing Blaney's Lincoln Square and Third Avenue Theatres, New York, also theatres in Brooklyn, Newark, Yonkers, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore and New Orleans. The name of A. H. Woods appears on many melodramas of the period. A. H. Woods Production Company had headquarters in New York, and following a list of recent plays in an ad in the Play Book Series, continues:

"All the above attractions are better equipped with casts, scenery and electrical effects than any other melodramatic plays on the road."

Another big producer located in New York was the Charles H. Wuerz'

Attractions. One of theirs which ran for three seasons was "Billy the Kid", by Walter Woods and Joseph Santley. Billy was played by Leroy Sumner, spoken of as "Young America's Favorite Actor". His photo, appearing in the novelized version of the play by Arda La Croix, in the Play Book Series, shows him as a handsome youngster, possibly in his late teens or early twenties. Scenes reproduced from the play, one of a Western barroom, another with Billy horseback on the stage, roping a man, indicate it was a drama produced on a large scale. For the season following, Leroy Sumner was booked for an appearance in "the Brilliant Melodramatic Sensation—DIAMOND DICK, JR.—Tons of Magnificent Scenery, a Great Acting Company, and a Soul-stirring Play". That's one I'd have liked to see—one of my favorite dime novel heroes, Bertie Wade (Diamond Dick, Jr.) brought to life on the stage! There was still another dime novel hero who trod the boards, Deadwood Dick—in "Deadwood Dick's Last Shot, or, The King and Queen of Gamblers", one of A. H. Woods' plays, novelized by Grace Miller White in the Play Book Series.

I remember Hal Reid's great play, "Custer's Last Fight", but cannot say with certainty whether it appeared at Blaney's Theatre, the National or the Casino. Buffalo Bill—not played by himself, as this was long after he'd left the stage to travel with his Wild West show—was a prominent character in the play as Custer's chief scout, and Mrs. Cody, Bill's mother, not his wife, was also in the cast of characters. During the action of the play, Mrs. Cody is tomahawked by Yellow Hand, the Cheyenne chief (whom Buffalo Bill killed, in real life, in a duel at War Bonnet Creek). Actually, as we know, Mrs. Cody suffered no such terrible fate.

"Custer's Last Fight" was novelized by Grace Miller White, published as No. 68 of the Play Book Series and No. 95 of the Railroad Series. Preserved for us, as the front cover of the book, is a reproduction in colors of an unusually fine poster advertising the play: an Indian village, with war-dancing warriors in the background, Cody tied to a burning stake in the foreground, facing Sitting Bull and Yellow Hand, one of whom is trying to prevent Dove Eye, an Indian girl, from reaching the scout with a knife to slash him free.

Probably second to Western dramas in popularity were police, detective and mystery plays. To mention a few, there was "The Millionaire Detective", by Charles E. Blaney and Howard Hall (not Dick Dobbs, the millionaire detective of the short-lived weekly, of course, but one Robert Rose, who played a dual role as Sir Robert Bancroft until the final curtain), "The Boy Detective," by Charles E. Blaney, "The Girl and the Detective", by Charles E. Blaney and J. Searle Dawley, "Wanted by the Police", Mittenenthal Bros. great play written by Langdon McCormick, "Secrets of the Police" and "Convict 999", both A. H. Woods' thrillers, and "The House of Mystery", whose authorship I'm not sure of.

Chinatown—both in New York and 'Frisco—was the setting for many sensational plays. They remind one of the exploits of Old and Young King Brady in this realm of the mysterious. I remember one very clearly—"Chinatown Charlie, the Opium Fiend", A. H. Woods' famous play. It is vividly recalled by the reproduction of a poster on Play Book Series No. 85, novelized by John P. Ritter, illustrating a high spot in the drama: Charlie's sweetheart confronting him in an opium den as he is hitting the pipe. Caption reads: "Charlie, you promised never to smoke opium again, and you have broken your promise!"

There was "The Chinatown Trunk Mystery", name of the playwright unknown to me, Charles E. Blaney's "The King of the Opium Ring", and two of A. H. Woods' productions, "The Opium Smugglers of 'Frisco", by John Oliver, and "The Queen of the Secret Seven", by Ike Swift (Shades of Nick Carter!

"The Queen of the Seven" was the title of one of the Dazaar series by Frederick Van Rensselaer Dey—no similarity, of course, except the title). The poster reproduced on the Play Book novelized by Olive Harper is a real thriller, as was the play itself, no doubt: a street scene in Chinatown, lighted by Chinese paper lanterns and the glow from open doorways and windows. A big Chinaman is carrying a white girl toward an open door, around which other Chinamen are grouped. A white man in silk topper and evening clothes is urging the big kidnapper to hurry, while a young woman in a handsome evening wrap stands at one side, viewing the action with evident satisfaction. She is the "Queen of the Secret Seven". In the background is a big, old-fashioned touring-car from which has sprung a determined looking young man, presumably the hero, bent on rescue. The caption reads: "The Kidnapping of Dora by the Secret Seven."

There are several illustrations in the book, black-and-white reproductions of posters of the play. The first, entitled, "The Torture Room of the Secret 7", shows the prisoner, Dora, blindfolded, in an opening in a brick wall, faced by the "Queen" and the "Seven" in masks and cowls (the latter presumably red in color), and with flaming torches in hand. The second, entitled, "The Victim", shows the entrance to a high-fenced gateway, blocked by an express wagon with the driver on the ground, watching two gentlemen in evening togs lower the body of a young woman, apparently dead, certainly unconscious, into a big trunk. The third, entitled, "Dividing the Plunder", shows the "Queen" at a table covered with sparkling valuables, surrounded by the masked and cowed members of the criminal society, a few with torches, others with knives bared. Two have seized the "Queen's" arms. A dispute over division of the spoils is apparent, and the "Seven" must have taken on a few new members, for there are twelve of them in the picture. The last, entitled, "The Pursuit", shows a big touring-car roaring around a curve in a steep cliffside trail, with what appears to be an old-time racing-car in pursuit, containing the hero and the driver. One of the men in the forward car is pitching a girl over the side of the tonneau, into the yawning chasm below. I'm not wondering how they managed this scene with the limitations of the stage, for it is not listed in the synopsis of scenes I give below, probably happened off-stage:

THE QUEEN OF THE SECRET SEVEN

The Characters.

James Garnett	-----	A Man of Wealth
Tom Garnett, His Son, Known as "The Stranger"	-----	
Roland Merrick	-----	A Man of Mystery
Rose Merrick	-----	His Wife
Irene Darton	-----	Her Sister
Sukey Saunders	-----	Irene's Humble Friend
William Kane	-----	Known as "The Scholar"
Barney Fay	-----	"Of No Consequence"
Moy Toy	}	Members of the Secret Seven
Songwong		
Ah Lee		

and

Olga Lenox ----- The Queen of the Secret Seven

ACT I—Sitting-room at Roland Merrick's.

ACT II—Scene I—Morning-room of the same house. Scene 2—A Street Scene in Chinatown. Scene 3—Moy Toy's gambling-house.

ACT III—The den of the Secret Seven.

ACT IV—Exterior of Olga Lenox's house.

(to be continued)

MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

199. Jack Barker, 301 Bona Allen Bldg., Atlanta 3, Georgia (new member)
 127. Thomas Funderberk, 519 Bashford Lane, Alexandria, Va. (new address)

NEWSY NEWS

by Ralph F. Cummings

Don Brewer reports that he lost his dear wife Effie nearly a year ago, on Friday, Feb. 13th, and he has been lost ever since. We all send our sympathy to you, as many of us have lost our dear ones, and so we know just how you feel. Kenneth Daggett lost his dear wife over a year ago, or about, and it would be nice for anyone to write these brothers, and cheer them up. When we lose our loved ones, I'm sure we will meet them in another world some day, for the good Lord always prepares a way for us all, who will follow, sooner or later. God bless all who have gone before us.

Commander Frank C. Acker, U.S.N. and family were enroute to Virginia from the west coast, when they stopped at Buffalo Bill's grave on Lookout mountain in Colorado, and other interesting places.

Harry St. Clair, 6917 Standish Dr., Hyattsville, Md., is in the hospital again, so if you write the above address, a nice get well card, I know he'll appreciate it very much.

Mrs. S. T. Hoyt, 1970 Ualakaa St., Honolulu 14, T. H., is interested in old books and novels of the sea relating to whaling, discovery, etc. in the Pacific Ocean, and of literature, emphasizing fiction, mentioning Hawaii before 1902.

Has anyone heard or know the whereabouts of Ralph Adimi or Adimare, once a member of our order.

Here's news, Bill Gander is working on Story Paper Collector No. 51. So it looks as if he is going to give us another issue. As a fellow says, once a publisher, always a publisher. Seems to get in your blood.

Brother Smeltzer has his little say about the vogue of rubber-stamping of dime novels years ago. He recites as follows: I have before me a novel quite well "plastered" with two rub-

ber-stampings on the colored cover. As I recall, the Perine stamp was the largest of them all, here it is:

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 P. O. Box 787

San Antonio, Texas

This rubber stamping measures 2½ x 5 inches.

Also, there is another stamping: The Paramount Exchange, 207 Eye Street, N. W., Washington, D. C., and a date stamped Dec. 19, 1914.

Just imagine what the cover looks like; a wonderful mutilation, you bet. The same performance occurred on the first reading page.

I recently purchased a book in a local department store sale entitled "Blood and Thunder"—Mid-Victorian Melodrama and Its Origins, by Maurice Willson Disher, published by Frederick Muller Ltd., 29 Saint James Street, W. C. 1, London, England in 1949. It may still be in print. It has many fine illustrations and depicts the exploits of many penny dreadful heroes including Jonathan Wild, Jack Sheppard, Paul Clifford, Paul Jones, Sweeney Todd and others. Many American writers and show people are mentioned, among them, Ned Buntline and Sylvanus Cobb.

William Langell

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(Advertisements)

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I have lots of old novels, magazines and story papers. Please write and tell me what you have and what you want. P. J. Moran, 1159 Bonita Lane, Walnut Creek, California.

For Sale. About 100 copies of New Magnet Library (Nick Carters) at 35¢ a copy. All in good condition. Lou Kohrt, 3749 Robinhood St., Houston 5, Texas.

For sale or trade. 300 Seaside Library, all different, and 300 Dicks Standard Plays, some duplication—good condition. Will accept best offer in cash or trade. John Edelberg, 5528 Bergenline Ave., West New York, N. J.

For sale or trade. 40 or 50 Alger books. Some very nice copies. Walter E. Brown, 511 9th St., Altoona, Pa.

For sale. Buffalo Bill Stories, Nick Carters, Diamond Dicks, Might and Main, Tip Tops, etc. Edwin H. Sis-

sung, 2213 Radio Ave., San Jose, Cal.

For sale, Old Novels and Story Papers, write for lists. S. B. Condon, So. Penobscot, Maine.

For sale, nice lot of Nickel Library, many dime novels of the 60's and 70's, Tony M. Peterson, Route 1, Genewa, Pa.

Wanted. Far West Library #192 and 194, N. Y. Detective Library #409 and Camp Fire Sparks by Capt. Jack Crawford. Col. Charles D. Randolph, 2316 Jefferson St., Davenport, Iowa.

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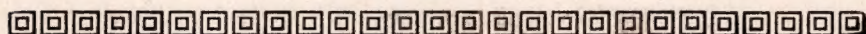
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